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TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM RU GG

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: SITREP 18: ALL EYES ON AKHALGORI

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. The situation remains tense in Akhalgori, with South Ossetian militia in an apparent standoff with Georgian police and interior forces; the Georgian government considers the location a potential flashpoint. The Russian presence in the west continues, maintaining a level of tension in those areas. Federal and local governments are providing aid to IDPs, assessing the damage and undertaking demining and repairs. The arrival of an American destroyer with humanitarian aid received wide recognition, and several AmCit children cases of note have been resolved. End Summary.

STANDOFF IN AKHALGORI

¶2. (C) On August 25, the OSCE observed at least 150 Georgian police and Interior Ministry forces and at least 36 vehicles in a small village outside Akhalgori (having heard reports of as many as 500 personnel). After reporting 200 South Ossetian militia and four vehicles in Akhalgori on August 24, the OSCE observed a few dozen militia and two vehicles on August 25. Both sides had entrenched their positions with such items as sandbags. The OSCE reported a calm situation in Akhalgori and saw no evidence of looting or fires, although the Georgian side had reported widespread damage, including at schools and administrative buildings. The closest Russian presence remains at the Ikoti checkpoint outside Akhalgori.

¶3. (C) The two sides offered conflicting reports on the situation. The Georgians expressed fears of provocative actions taken by the Ossetian side. The Georgians planned to meet with the Ossetians on August 26. The Ossetian side reported the Georgian governor had not appeared for a scheduled meeting with the Ossetian commandant at 0900 on August 25. Although the OSCE did not observe evidence of looting or fires, the Ossetian side would now allow the OSCE to enter a school to inspect it. The Ossetians did admit confiscating computers from an administrative building "for control."

¶4. (SBU) Georgian Foreign and Interior Ministry officials told the diplomatic community on August 24 the arrival of Ossetian militia in Akhalgori, a historically Georgian town in a historically Georgian region of South Ossetia, occurred after the cease-fire. They reported 400 Ossetian militia in Akhalgori with 16 armored vehicles and mortars. They also reported the local mayor and police chief had been replaced with South Ossetians and Georgian police in villages south of Akhalgori had been given one day to leave. They also said Akhalgori residents were being told that they would have to accept Russian passports or leave the area.

¶5. (U) Elsewhere in South Ossetia, the press reported that Russian forces demolished tractors and burned houses in the village of Tamarasheni and "punished" residents of Tkviavi. Foreign journalists reported the destruction of buildings and the kidnapping and killing of residents in Tkviavi. Local

journalists reported being detained and robbed of their car and video equipment in Tkviavi.

¶ 16. (C) In Gori, the situation continues to improve. The British Ambassador visited the city on August 24, including the site of the fuel-carrying rail car that exploded. He described a two kilometer of shrapnel and ordnance around the site, presumably from an explosion of ammunition and ordnance detonated by departing Russian troops. The Georgian Government estimates that approximately 10,000 IDPs have returned to the city and to the surrounding villages. The Georgian Government has given contradictory advice, encouraging IDPs to return and organizing buses to assist, but at the same time warning Gori residents of the dangers of unexploded ordnance. As a result, some IDPs are choosing to wait in Tbilisi for a few more days before returning.

SITUATION IN THE WEST

¶ 17. (SBU) The press reported that Russian troops entered a shipbuilding plant in Poti and barred local employees from entering; two journalists were reportedly detained and beaten upon trying to film a checkpoint near Poti. Russian checkpoints in the west have reportedly been strengthened. Two new ones were established on the Gomi-Sachkere road, and Russians are reportedly allowing vehicles to pass only after inspection. The Russians reportedly left the base in Senaki heavily mined, including in such places as electric switches.

¶ 18. (C) The arrival in Batumi of a U.S. Navy destroyer loaded

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with humanitarian aid was widely reported, with Defense Minister Kezerashvili commenting that the ship's arrival delivered a strong humanitarian and political message. The Embassy's Defense Attaché visited Poti, reporting that operations on the commercial side were surprisingly normal and that there were no Russian checkpoints on the road leading south from Poti to Batumi.

PRISONER EXCHANGE

¶ 19. (U) The press reported the Russians returned two military and five civilian detainees and the Georgians returned six military detainees, with talks on further returns continuing.

WAR DAMAGE

¶ 10. (U) The press carried numerous reports of casualties and property damage, including:

-- The explosion of two mines in Gori, one badly injuring a man working in his garden and one killing a woman picking berries in the outskirts of Gori.

-- The burning of three railway fuel tanks near Skra, Shida Kartli. The fire was caused by explosions at a Georgian arsenal near Skra.

-- The burning by Russians of an individual's house in Karaleti and a poultry farm in Mejvrishkevi, both in Shida Kartli.

-- The destruction of 50 hectares of woodland in Ateni Gorge near Gori, with an additional 40 hectares currently burning. contributing to a total of 500 hectares of destroyed woodland around the country.

PROTESTS

¶ 11. (U) The press reported that Russian forces fired shots in the air to disperse a demonstration in Pervomaiski, in Khobi District in Samegrelo, but the crowd did not disperse.

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

¶12. (C) In a televised speech, President Saakashvili proposed the creation of a special council, including members of the opposition like Levan Gachechiladze, to coordinate aid to the victims of the war. He also made strong statements about the imminent development of Russia's aggression, the country's resolve to rebuild, the significance of international support, and the need for national unity. Saakashvili noted that the conflict was a "failure of western intelligence" and criticized Europe for a lack of support. According to the French Ambassador, Saakashvili's remarks led to a call from President Sarkozy and harsh criticism from the French. Reportedly, Saakashvili apologized to Sarkozy for his remarks.

IMPACT OF THE WAR ON LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

¶13. (SBU) U.S. Government partners reported that at least nine municipalities have been directly affected by the conflict. Although precise assessments of the damage are not yet available, local governments will need at least computers, other office equipment and supplies, and repairs to building and infrastructure. Other governments in the Kakheti, Imereti and Gurian regions have been affected by the influx of IDPs, who are generally located in schools, youth camps and other government buildings, making them unavailable for normal use. The buildings will require repairs after the IDPs' departure. Local government staff are unavailable to provide normal services because they are working to distribute humanitarian aid and meet the IDPs' needs. Funding for normal services has likewise been reduced.

AMCIT CHILDREN UPDATE

¶14. (SBU) Two cases of American citizen children stranded outside Tbilisi that drew congressional attention have been resolved. The ICRC reunited Nicholas Shiukashvili with his mother in Tbilisi August 23; he will travel back to the U.S. shortly (his case was raised by Rep. Bishop). Kansas City natives Sofiya and Mikhail Momtselidze (are scheduled to arrive by public bus in Tbilisi August 25 (their case was raised by Rep. Moore). Approximately 30 AmCit children remain outside Tbilisi, with reports of additional children continuing to arrive. Most have made their own travel plans or have no plans to travel. The ICRC has received requests for assistance in other cases and will provide additional information to the consular section as it becomes available.

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VISITORS

¶15. (U) Senator Lugar's August 23-24 visit was widely covered in the press. The economic delegation led by U/S Jeffrey arrived 8/25 and the OVP advance team arrives 8/27. Presidential candidate John McCain's wife Cindy arrives in Tbilisi 8/26. A delegation led by Rep. Duncan Hunter will visit Tbilisi September 1.

TEFFT